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House Meets in Secret On War in Nicaragua

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The House met in an extraordinary secret session yesterday to begin debate on the Reagan administration's escalating "secret war" against the leftist government of Nicaragua, now perhaps the most controversial foreign policy issue of this pre-election year.

The debate came as the Navy announced it was dispatching an eight-ship carrier battle group to the west coast of Central America as a "demonstration of U.S. interest in the region," and as officials confirmed plans to hold a large-scale U. S.-Honduran military exercise near the Honduras-Nicaragua border next month, also as a show of U.S. resolve.

As the House doors were about to be closed yesterday afternoon, Rep. Don Edwards (D-Calif.), an administration critic just returned from a four-day fact-finding mission to Central America, warned his colleagues on the floor that "there's a big invasion going on right now," and Rep. George Miller (D-Calif.), who accompanied him, said the "so-called secret war in Nicaragua is much more extensive than the American public has been led to believe."

But administration defenders said that whatever war exists was started by the other side.

"What's at stake here," Rep. Don Ritter (R-Pa.) said after the debate, "is a massive commitment" of Soviet and Cuban arms to leftist regimes and rebels in the region, "perhaps the most massive violation of the Monroe Doctrine that we have seen in the history of this hemisphere."

President Reagan used similar language yesterday in a ceremony marking Captive Nations Week, accusing the Soviets and Cuba of "building a war machine in Nicaragua."

The four hours of debate behind closed and guarded doors, only the fifth such session in House history, produced no clear result, leaving uncertain the prospect for Democratic-sponsored legislation which would ban further undercover U.S. aid to anti-government guerrillas in Nicaragua.

The bill, which has been approved by the Democratic majorities on both the House Foreign Affairs and Intelligence committees, instead would set up an overt \$80 million program of aid to friendly governments in the region; it would be up to them to fight the leftists.

House Speaker Thomas P. (Tip) O'Neill Jr. (D-Mass.) said yesterday's session, called to discuss "confidential communications," was the best attended of the year and said he

doubted that more than 20 members were absent.

Other members, however, said there were few surprises. Ritter said the audience fell off sharply after the first hour.

"We felt we were going to learn top secret information," he said. "Everybody waited with bated breath . . . After an hour it was clear we weren't going to find out anything we didn't know already."

House Intelligence Committee Chairman Edward P. Boland (D-Mass.), one of the key sponsors of the bill to shift from covert to overt aid, led off with a history of the controversy.

Several members said Rep. Lee H. Hamilton (D-Ind.), who is a member of both committees with jurisdiction, made a spirited presentation of the case for terminating the undercover program.

Rep. C.W. (Bill) Young (R-Fla.), a member of the Intelligence Committee, presented the case against the cutoff, citing secret committee transcripts in an effort to prove that the administration is complying with

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